

Please Lie to Me

by Erin Wade

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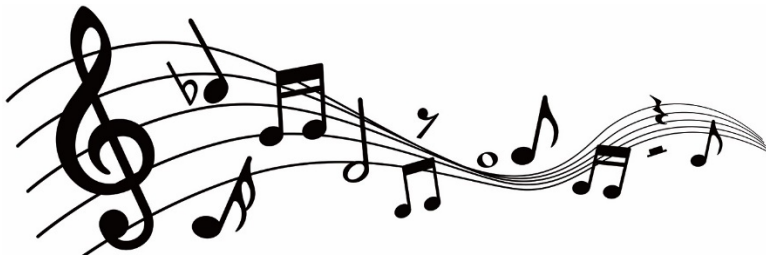
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Chapter 1-Niccola Amato

Her concert was perfect. No one on earth can play a violin the way she does. She had sold out the two-thousand-plus seats of the Santa Fe Opera on a Thursday evening. I wondered if she would remember me. They say you never forget your first love and I know I have not forgotten her. I watched her in the mirror behind the bar. She looked around then walked toward me.

She sat down beside me and ordered a dirty martini. "I'll pay for that," a tall, muscular fellow with a heavy beard tossed his American Express card onto the bar.

She picked it up and handed it back to him. "I'm very capable of buying my own drinks," she said. "I do not want any company."

"But maybe I do," he grunted tossing his card back onto the counter.

I picked up the card and sent it sailing into the people on the crowded dance floor. "The lady doesn't desire your company," I said spinning my stool around to face him. "You should move on."

"You going to make me blondie" he snorted.

I pulled open my blazer just enough to give him a look at my Glock. "If I have to."

"I don't want any trouble," he said holding his hands up in the air and backing away from us.

I covered my gun and returned to my glass of wine.

"Thank you," she said softly.

I nodded without looking at her. The bartender placed her drink in front of her and she pulled a card from her purse to pay him. She finished her drink and refused his offer of another.

“Do you know of a good restaurant nearby?” She asked me.

Everything in me screamed, “Say no!”

If I turned to face her I would be ripping a Band-Aid off my heart. “Two blocks down, there’s a great Italian restaurant.”

She gripped my wrist. “Reed?”

I turned to face her. “Hello Niccola.”

“Reed Redman. I can’t believe it’s you. What are you doing in Santa Fe?”

“I live here.” Her slight accent made my heart flutter just as it had when I was a teenager.

“It’s been so long,” she muttered. “Have you eaten dinner?”

“No, I just watched your concert and stopped for a drink on my way home.”

“Please, have dinner with me?”

“I don’t . . .”

“Please, Reed. I’ve missed you more than I can say.”

I looked around the room. “I’m surprised you aren’t surrounded by your usual adoring fans.”

“I slipped out the back door. I had to get away from all the fanfare and hullabaloo. Sometimes it is overwhelming.” She giggled. “I even gave my security personnel the slip. They will be furious. I understand they have a real bad ass for a boss.”

I tossed a twenty on the counter for my drink, caught her hand, and led her outside into the cool night air.

I eyed her stiletto heels and hailed a cab. I gave the driver the name of the restaurant and leaned back in the seat. She slipped her arm through mine and hugged it.

“You watched my concert?” She beamed.

I nodded, not telling her I had flown all over the world to watch her concerts.

“What did you think?”

“I think you have improved tremendously,” I teased. “You are much better than that seventeen-year-old child prodigy I once knew.”

She giggled and hugged my arm tighter. “You always made me laugh,” she said. “No, you always made me happy.”

The cab pulled to the curb and the driver pointed to the card device for payment. I tapped my card, added a tip, and opened the door. I extended my hand to her so she could steady herself getting out of the car.

“I love your heels.” I grinned.

“They’re miserable.” She laughed. “I hate them, but they are sexy.”

“I can vouch for that.”

She slid her arm through mine again and leaned on me heavily. “Are they killing you?” I asked.

“More than you will ever know.”

The hostess seated us in a secluded booth. The dim lights and soft music were romantic and relaxing. “They think we are lovers,” Niccola whispered in my ear, her mouth so close I could feel her breath against my cheek. I didn’t reply.

The server headed toward our table. “Do you still like the same wine?” I asked.

“I do.”

I ordered wine for us and asked our server what she recommended. “Veal scallopini with mushrooms is our signature dish,” she suggested. “Very good.”

“May we share an order,” Niccola asked.

“Of course,” the server replied. “May I suggest our arancini as an appetizer? They are to die for.”

“Why not?” I replied remembering how Niccola had loved the little stuffed rice balls when we were teens.

The server returned with our wine. Niccola kicked off her heels, relaxed against the back of the booth, and put her feet in my lap.

She watched me from beneath heavy lashes. “You used to massage my feet after my concerts,” she reminded me.

“I used to massage all of you,” I shot back at her. “That was a lifetime ago. You’re married now.”

She nodded but didn’t remove her feet. I found myself unconsciously rubbing her arches. Her soft moans made my heart rate increase.

“I noticed you aren’t wearing your wedding band.” I said as casually as I could.

“The metal sometimes interferes with my fingering.”

I grinned mischievously and she blushed but ignored my childishness.

“The metal strikes the strings, and I can’t afford even a rare mistake.” She suppressed a smile.

“To you and your incredible music,” I toasted her after the server left our table.

“Tonight, I fell in love with your music all over again,” I said. “That violin and your talent are a marriage made in heaven. I’ve never heard an instrument sound like that. The warm mellow tones and resonance are breathtaking. Your performance was perfect.”

“Thank you. I am so fortunate that Mr. Bransom is allowing me to play his Stradivarius,” she said. “The quality of the instrument allows me to get the sound I strive for—the sound that soothes my soul.”

“It is a magnificent instrument. I read about it. It was made in 1717 and you call it Gabriel. I’m curious, what kind of security do you have in place for a violin that is valued at twelve-million dollars?”

“The security is amazing. If I told you about it, I’d have to kill you.” She laughed. “You have always been my biggest fan, Reed. I love that about you. You appreciate the same

fine music that I do. But enough about me tell me about your life. Have you married?"

"No. I travel a lot. Few women will tolerate that. I'm surprised your husband doesn't tour with you."

"He can't leave his business for very long. You know how it is when the boss is away."

"Yes. I do. Are there children in your future?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "I do not have time for children."

"I honestly love other people's children, but I have no desire for any of my own," I admitted.

"I read that your detective agency is doing great things."

"We try."

"And that you have offices in several states now including New York."

I nodded. My business wasn't something I wanted to discuss with her. I was certain she had no idea she was one of my biggest clients and she was one of the reasons we had just opened an office in London.

I encouraged her to talk about herself, eager to know all there was to know about her. Was she pleased with her career and fame? Did she still think about opening a music school to encourage teens to play the violin? Was she happy with her marriage?

"I have been so blessed in my musical career," she said, "but I'm not getting any younger and touring is more exhausting every year. I want to open a music studio, but my husband says I'd get bored."

"I doubt music will ever bore you," I said. "I do worry you will burn out. You tour constantly."

She smiled sweetly. "You worry about me. So, you do think about me?"

"More than I should," I admitted.

We laughed talking about our childhood and our wins and losses in life. "How is your father?" she asked.

"More bitter than ever and he still hates me. Blames me for destroying his career and I guess I did."

“You didn’t do it alone,” she reminisced. “Although you bore the brunt of the outrage, I believe I was equally to blame.”

“That’s water under the bridge. Let’s not discuss it.”

“I’m sorry your father got blamed for what happened between you and me, but I don’t regret us,” she declared.

“How long will you be in town?” I asked, changing the subject because I never wanted to get sucked down that black rabbit hole again.

“I have a couple of weeks to rest before I fly to Italy to kick off my tour overseas. I plan to stay in Santa Fe the entire time. I’m adding a new piece for my Rome performance, and I must practice endlessly to perfect it.”

“This is a wonderful time of year to be in my fair city. You should take a few days to relax and rejuvenate.”

“I would welcome a beautiful, blonde tour guide,” she cut her eyes at me and wrinkled her nose in that cute way that made my heart stutter.

Tell her you are busy, my brain screamed, but my mouth said, “I think I know a woman who fits that description and I’m certain she could clear her calendar for a few days to guide you.”

“I would love that.” She bowed her head slightly and looked up at me through long lashes that haunted my dreams.

“Last call for drinks,” the server approached our table.

I slipped my card on the table. “Just the check please. Where are you staying, Nikki?”

She smiled. “No one has called me that in a very long time.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Don’t be sorry. I love the way you say it. Nikki! It sounds so carefree and happy.”

“I truly hope you are happy, Nikki,” I said sincerely.

“Right now, I am the happiest girl in the world.” She sighed.

##

“Where are you staying?” I asked again as we stood on the curb waiting for a cab.

“Inn of the Governors in downtown Santa Fe.”

“I’m familiar with it. It’s a nice property.”

After waiting twenty minutes, I suggested we walk back to the restaurant and get my car. “I’d be delighted to drive you to your hotel.”

“I’ve taken enough of your time,” she said.

“I don’t think you have a choice. I don’t see a cab anywhere.” I pointed out. “But those heels will kill you.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her back inside the restaurant. I spoke with the manager who agreed to drive us the two blocks to the cantina to get my car.

##

“What time will you pick me up in the morning?” She asked when I pulled my vehicle beneath the portico.

“Why don’t you call me when you get up. I know you are tired and need to rest. Sleep late and give me a call when you are ready to venture out. We can have brunch, or a late lunch then do touristy things. You are right in the center of our arts district. I must take you to see Mother. She will be thrilled to see you.”

“I would love that. You have always been so thoughtful,” she smiled then brushed my lips with hers. “Do you want to come in for a nightcap?”

“No!” I said too quickly. “I don’t think that is a good idea. I’ll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams.”

I watched her until she was safely inside the hotel lobby then drove the three blocks from her hotel to the building that housed my loft apartment and the headquarters of my security agency.

##

I won't lie. I am pleased with where I am in my life. The only thing that has always been missing is Niccola Amato.

My father was the colonel of the Los Alamos Demolition Range and Nikki's father was his commanding officer, Major General Robert Amato.

When Major General Amato and his family were assigned to the army base, my father was the commanding officer below him. They became close friends, and our families spent a lot of time together socially. Nikki and I attended the base school and were always there for each other. We shared our darkest secrets and our worst fears.

Amato had two goals in life: he would become a general and his daughter Niccola would become the world's greatest violinist. He would let nothing stand in their way, not even friendship. He went on to become a general. Thanks to Nikki and me and our little indiscretion celebrating high school graduation, my father was transferred to the White Sands Missile Range Army Base in Otero, NM, to serve out his days until retirement as lesser officers were promoted over him.

My mother listened to his constant ranting against me until she packed up our belongings and moved us to Santa Fe. I have no interaction with my father to this day.

A popular Santa Fe artist, my mother earned enough to support us, and I went to college on scholarships and the money I earned from part-time jobs. With a major in computer science and a minor in cyber security, I went to work for the Santa Fe Police Department. While I loved law enforcement work, I was frustrated by the politics involved and started thinking of other outlets for my talents.

My second year on the job the daughter of one of our wealthiest citizens was kidnapped by her nanny and held for a ten-million-dollar ransom.

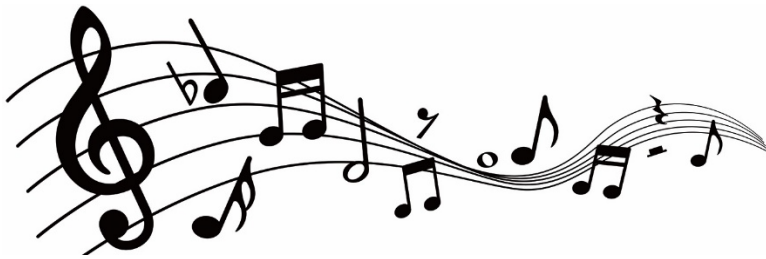
As the deadline approached to make the payment, my lieutenant suspected the nanny, but had no proof and no idea where the girl was being held.

I may have bent the rules to hack some personal computers and phones to locate the girl which resulted in my immediate dismissal from the force.

The girl's father learned what had happened and approached me to find his child. He offered a million-dollar reward to anyone who could provide the location of his daughter and was more than willing to pay it to me. I provided the address where the girl was held captive, and he sent in a team of security operatives to save her.

That series of events set me on the path of my life's work, and I opened a detective and security agency in downtown Santa Fe. Using the funds from the reward, I purchased an old building that had been condemned. The owners wanted to unload it at a fair price that left me enough money to bring it up to code.

I was able to build eight loft apartments on the second floor of the building and spaces for offices and shops on the ground level. As I said earlier, the only thing missing from my life was Nikki Amato.



Chapter 2-Guarding Gabriel

I was in the office before eight and my office manager had a stack of messages and questions that required my time until after 11:00 a.m.

“Sam Bransom called,” She finished our briefing. “He wants to speak to you at noon. He will call you at 12:00 p.m. sharp.” Fran informed me.

“Any idea what he wants?”

“No. I tried to take a message, but his secretary said he will only speak to you.”

“I have plenty to keep me busy until he calls,” I mumbled. “Nikki Amato will call me. Be sure you put her call through immediately.”

“The violinist?” Fran raised her perfectly shaped brows.

“We’re old friends.” I smirked. “I ran into her after her concert last night.”

“I was at that concert. I wish I had seen you,” Fran exclaimed. “I adore her.”

So do I, I thought.

“She is incredible. I never dreamed a violin could sound so . . . so mellow.” Fran added.

“I think it’s the wrist action,” I quipped.

“I’m sure it has nothing to do with the twelve-million-dollar instrument she is playing,” Fran declared. “I bet that is why Sam Bransom is calling you.”

“You should be on the streets as a detective instead of wasting your talents behind a desk.”

“Then who would keep you on the straight and narrow?” she shot back.

The phone rang and we checked our watches. “That’s probably him,” Fran choked. “I’ll answer it.”

“I can answer it. That will save all the ‘my secretary is talking to your secretary business.’”

I picked up the office phone. “Reed Redman.”

“Reed, just the lady I need to talk to.” Sam’s robust voice filled my ear.

“Hello, sir. How are you?”

“Fine, fine. Listen, I’m increasing the insurance on Gabriel, and I need you to add extra security for it. Niccola is taking it on tour in Italy and I fear it will be stolen.”

“Sir, we already have two men with it, and doesn’t the insurance company provide their own security too?” I asked.

“I’ll feel better if you add two more security agents to travel with it and keep it in sight until it is safely secured after Niccola’s performances.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll assign two of my best agents.”

“Starting immediately,” he added. “She is in your town for two weeks preparing for her Italy tour and she will be practicing on Gabriel.”

“I will take care of it, sir. Um, does Miss Amato know that you have hired my agency to protect Gabriel?”

“I haven’t informed her, but it is fine if you tell her. It’s been a pleasure talking with you,” he said then hung up.

“We need to add two more agents to guard Gabriel,” I said.

“For a total of four?”

“Yep.”

My cellphone rang and Nikki’s pretty face filled the screen. “I’m starving,” she declared before I could say hello.

“On my way,” I chirped heading out the door and waving goodbye to Fran who squinted her eyes at me.

“Bring her back here,” she called after me.

Nikki was standing in the lobby of her hotel signing autographs. “We drove to Santa Fe just to hear you play,” a young woman gushed as Nikki signed her opera house program. “I can’t believe we’re staying in the same hotel otherwise I would have gone home with the knowledge I’d heard one of the world’s greatest violinists, but no autograph. Now I can show my friends you signed my program.”

“I love your dedication to good music.” Nikki’s warm smile brightened the room. “I must go now. My security agent is here to collect me.”

The group turned to stare at me. “Wow, she could collect me any time,” one of the groupies commented.

“Yes,” Nikki’s smile brightened. “She is beautiful, but very dangerous,” she teased in a deep sultry voice.

As we left the hotel two of my agents moved around us.

“Mr. Bransom has increased the insurance on Gabriel,” Nikki explained to me. “Which increases my security. I hate it when they follow me around like this. They will ruin our day.”

“Where is the violin?” I asked.

“Locked in the closet safe in my room,” she frowned. “You don’t think I carry it around with me, do you?”

“That’s what I thought. Excuse me a minute.”

I pulled the two agents aside and spoke to them softly. “Your job is not to guard Miss Amato,” I reminded them. “It is to guard the violin known as Gabriel. You should be standing outside her apartment door and making certain no one can access the rooms through windows or any other entrances. In short, keep your eyes on the violin not the violinist.” I wrote Nikki’s room number on the palm of my agent’s hand. “Guard this room with your life. If housekeeping goes into clean it you stay right by their side. Don’t let anyone in that room get out of your sight.

“Yes, boss,” they chorused and headed for the elevator.

“What did you tell them?” Nikki asked as we got into my car.

“I told them I would guard you and they should guard Gabriel.”

“Am I safe with you?” she teased.

“I would protect you with my life,” I answered ignoring her insinuation I might be dangerous.

##

“Sam Bransom called my office this morning,” I informed her. “He added two more men to guard the violin. He is increasing the insurance amount on it.”

“Your agency is tasked with protecting Gabriel?” She questioned.

“Yes, any time you are in the U.S. the guards you see are from our agency.”

She laughed gleefully as she fastened her seatbelt. “I had no idea. So, if I asked Sam to have you assigned to Gabriel when I travel abroad would you do it?”

“He is one step ahead of you,” I said. “He asked us to do that about three months ago. We now have an agency in London.”

“I mean if I request that you personally guard Gabriel, would you?”

“Please don’t do that to me, Nikki. That would be cruel, and you know it.”

“You do still have feelings for me,” she whispered.

I turned to face her. “You still have a husband. I’m not in the business of dating other people’s wives.” I started the car and pulled it away from the curb.

“Reed, my marriage is not one that was made in heaven.” She placed her hand on my arm. “It is one that was arranged by my father. It is supposed to be in name only. I was assured Fredo had no real interest in me, that he was gay and needed a beard. My father owed Fredo’s father a debt,

that could be settled with our marriage. I decided it didn't matter. I travel all the time and wouldn't be around Fredo. Turned out he was bisexual and forced himself on me. I now stay away from him. We don't live together but he acts more and more like a jealous husband."

I kept my eyes on the road, afraid to look at her. "Nikki, that doesn't change the fact that you are married."

"Where are you taking me to lunch?" She switched moods and conversations.

"What would you like?"

"Is Luminaria's patio open?" She asked.

"I'm sure it is."

"Is their tiramisu still wonderful?" she queried.

"Yes, it is."

"Then I want to go there."

We drove in silence until she placed her hand on my arm again. "Reed, I miss you so much. I don't know how we lost touch with each other."

"You were studying the violin at The Yehudi Menuhin School in Stoke d'Abernon in England and I was here working night and day to finish college."

"You stopped returning my calls," she murmured.

I didn't respond.

"Why?" she asked.

"I couldn't. It hurt too much. Your father would have made my dad's life a living hell if he thought we were talking. Our lives were on separate paths even though I did follow everything you did."

"Fate has let our paths cross again," she noted.

"Fate's a little too late," I pointed out, "but we can still be friends."

"With benefits?" she grinned impishly.

"No, just friends."

I pulled the car in front of the valet station and took the ticket he held out to me as he opened Nikki's door.

The lunch crowd had cleared out, so we had our choice of seating. She selected a table on the open patio. I ordered our wine and studied her as she perused the menu. At thirty-five, she looked in her mid-twenties. Her lips were full, and her skin was flawless. She wore only a hint of makeup and blonde highlights streaked her light brown hair. Her violet eyes danced as she gave the server her order ending with, “We’re going to share an order of tiramisu for dessert.”

I ordered then returned my full attention to her.

“Sam is increasing the insurance on Gabriel to eighteen-million dollars,” she informed me.

“Wow, did he have it reappraised?”

“Yes, it is very rare and,” she blushed slightly.

“And you have made it worth more than ever because you play it everywhere you go.”

She smiled and nodded. “It does as much for me as I do for it.”

“How long will you tour?” I asked.

“Three more months then I will return to the states. My husband has opened a business in New York.”

“Fredo Donatelli,” I said his name. “What business is he in?”

“Men’s clothing, high-priced suits, that sort of thing.” She furrowed her brow. “I don’t get involved in his business.”

“I have friends who swear by Donatelli suits.” I lied trying to say something positive about her husband although I knew his suits weren’t the same quality as Giorgio Armani’s.

“You are always so kind,” she said.

I wondered if she knew what it felt like to sit across the table from a woman you’d loved half your life and make small talk. Her violet gaze met mine and I knew she did. She pulled my hand to her lips and kissed my knuckles.

Suddenly lights flashed and people were scurrying around us. I jumped in front of her, my hand on my Glock, then I realized the paparazzi had recognized her.

“Go away before I call the police,” I demanded herding them away from the table and signaling for the owner of the restaurant who hurried over with several waiters and pushed the photographers outside.

“I am so sorry, Miss Redman,” the owner kept apologizing. “Please finish your lunch in peace. They will not bother you again.”

“You must get used to the paparazzi,” Nikki exclaimed, “if you are going to travel with me.”

“But I’m not—” she placed her finger against my lips.

“Shush, I don’t want to argue with you,” she whispered.

I laughed and shook my head remembering how Niccola Amato always got her way with me.

We finished our lunch and the server brought out tiramisu and coffee. Nikki cut a piece of the dessert and held it up to my lips. “Remember when we used to feed each other tiramisu?” She giggled.

I remembered. I’d played each joyous moment over in my mind a million times. “How could I forget?” I murmured holding a bite of the pastry to her lips. She held my gaze as she closed her lips around my offering and slowly pulled the treat from the spoon.

We finished the most seductive lunch I’ve ever eaten and walked arm in arm to the car. “I promised my office manager I would bring you to meet her,” I said. “She attended your concert last night.”

“I’d like that. I want to see your office.”

##

Nikki turned around in a circle in front of my office. “This is only a few blocks from my hotel,” she noted.

“Three to be exact,” I informed her.

“This is a beautiful building.” She examined the building from top to bottom. “You have a coffee shop and a restaurant, a pharmacy and a liquor store right next door to you.”

“Mother’s art gallery is on the other side,” I added.

“Oh, I would love to see your mother.”

“We will, but first come meet Fran.”

The door buzzed as we walked in, and Fran looked up from her desk. A huge smile spread across her face as she recognized Nikki. Fran quickly walked around her desk and held out her hand. “Niccola Amato this is Fran Shaw, the lady who runs this place.”

Nikki ignored Fran’s outstretched hand and pulled her into a hug. “Reed has told me so much about you,” she said. “I feel like we are old friends.”

“I’m glad she talks to you.” Fran frowned at me. “I only learned today that she knows you personally.”

“Reed never was a name dropper,” Nikki glanced at me. “We’ve been friends since we were twelve.”

“I promised Nikki a tour of our offices,” I stopped the banter at my expense.

“Let me do the honors while you return two important phone calls on your desk,” Fran instructed.

I read the messages Fran had placed on my desk. One was from a software company that had recently engaged us to find the mole in their office. The other was my best friend Lieutenant Blake Markum at the Santa Fe Police Department. Blake often hired me to do cyber intelligence work for the department.

I returned Blake’s call first.

“I have a quick, easy one for you,” Blake greeted.

“Nothing is ever quick and easy with you, Lieutenant.” I laughed. “What’s up?”

“The Cities of Gold Casino thinks they have a hacker hitting their slots. Can you spend a couple of days checking it out?”

“I can’t get to it until Tuesday,” I said. “I am tied up until then.”

“What’s her name?” Blake teased.

“You really should give up on the comedy routine,” I chided him.

“You’re not getting any younger,” Blake reminded me.

“Give me a name. I’ll call them so they will get off your back,” I promised.

I jotted down the name and number Blake gave me. “I’ll take care of it and thanks for the reference.”

“Have fun.” He chortled as he disconnected our call.

I called the software company and the casino and promised them my full attention on Wednesday. Nikki and Fran entered my office as I finished the calls.

“I’m impressed.” Nikki smiled as she studied the plaques and awards that covered one of my office walls. “The police department gives you citizenship awards after they fired you?”

I laughed. “Yeah, go figure.”

“She is being modest,” Fran chimed in. “She manages most of their cyber security problems—from the mayor’s office to an occasional problem on the Indian reservations.”

“I’m proud of you,” Nikki said. Her eyes sparkled and she made my stomach flip with her million-dollar smile. *God I still love her.*

“Fran, we’re going to visit Mom and I’m going to take off until Tuesday to play tour guide for Nikki. Call me if it is a dire emergency.”

Fran placed her hand on my forehead, “No fever. I am sure you are sick. You haven’t taken a four-day weekend since I’ve known you.”

I tried not to look at Nikki. “I’ve never had a reason to,” I responded.

We said our goodbye and walked outside into the warm Santa Fe sunshine. “Mom’s art gallery is around the block. We can walk or I can drive.”

“Let’s walk. It feels glorious.” She spread her arms as if hugging the world. “The air here is so clean.”

She admired a dress in the window of a fashionable boutique and stooped down to pet a tiny Chihuahua as the owner recognized her. “I loved your concert last night,” the woman said. “You are amazing.”

Nikki blushed slightly and thanked her. “I appreciate you attending.”

“I hope you will come back soon,” the woman encouraged. “I could listen to you play forever.”

“So, you are a workaholic,” Nikki teased looping her arm through mine.

“Says the woman who practices seven hours a day,” I teased back.

“I love what I do,” Nikki noted. “It isn’t work.”

“I understand. I feel the same way.”

“Oh my, gosh, Reed,” she gasped. “Look at this. It is breathtaking. Who is the artist?” she asked bending down to look at the painter’s signature. “Raven Redman,” she squealed. “Your mother painted this. She is incredibly talented.”

“She’s extremely popular in the western half of the United States,” I bragged on my mom. “She is going to exhibit in a New York gallery in November. Maybe we will get to see you then.”

“Niccola, is that you?” Mom met us at the door hugging Nikki like a long-lost child. “Let me look at you.” She held Nikki at arm’s length and checked her out. “You are even more beautiful than I remember.”

“And you look wonderful,” Nikki replied. “I had no idea you were such a talented artist.”

“Oh, my dear, my talent pales in comparison to yours. We have followed your career and I am so proud of you.”

We walked through Mom’s gallery as Nikki praised her work. “New York will love you,” she declared. “And your name, Raven Redman. They will think you are an indian or

something exotic. When we were kids I used to imagine being named Raven.”

Mom laughed pulling her into another hug. “We have missed you, dear.”

“I’ve missed you every single day,” Nikki murmured gazing into my eyes over mom’s shoulder.

It was almost sundown when tourists from Kansas entered mom’s gallery. “We must have the canvas in your window,” the woman exclaimed. “The one with the purples and magentas. It is incredible. Please tell me, it is available. Is the artist local? Is there any way we could meet her?”

When the woman ran out of breath, mom began answering her questions. “I am Raven Redman, that is my work and I’m delighted to meet you.”

The woman and her husband went wild praising my mom’s talent and asking her all sorts of questions about her art and the gallery.

“We’re going to run, mom. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nikki hugged her again and as we walked out the door I heard the woman ask, “Was that Niccola Amato?”

“Run,” I whispered in her ear as we picked up speed and turned the corner.

Nikki couldn’t stop giggling. “I never thought I’d run from my admirers,” she said, “but I just want to be with you.”

“We need to get you some big sunshades and a hat, so you won’t be so easily recognized.”

“Okay, but I want something classy, not one of those floppy brimmed garden hats women wear.”

“What about a Panama hat with the front brim turned down to hide your lovely face?” I gestured to a hat in the window of the Santa Fe Hat Company.”

She clapped her hands. “Perfect!”

We ran inside and purchased the hat as the owners were locking the door for the day. It was dark when we returned to the sidewalk.

“Wow! Time flies when I’m with you,” she exclaimed pulling the brim of the hat down over her eyes. “I’m hungry.”

“Your hotel has an excellent restaurant,” I suggested.

“No, there are guests who have already recognized me. They will want to visit.”

“I could cook for you,” I volunteered.

A devilish smile crossed her face. “I’d like that. How long will it take us to get to your place?”

“About two minutes,” I replied as we turned the corner and walked to the middle of the block where gold inlaid letters announced, “Santa Fe Lofts.”

“You live here? Right in the middle of Santa Fe?”

“Yes.”

I opened the door for her and pushed the button to open the elevator door. On the second floor, I led her to the door of my loft.

“Reed, this is magnificent. It is huge.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it! It is every woman’s dream. Your kitchen is to die for.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t cook a lot,” I said. “Dinners for one aren’t very inspiring.”

She caught my hand. “I could help you with that.”

“Do you cook?”

“No, silly. I mean we could have dinners for two every night.”

I exhaled the breath I was holding. “You mean two weeks of heaven and then back to hell. No thank you. That is one experience I never want to relive.”

“You must know I never intended to hurt you.” I couldn’t look away from the sadness in her eyes. “God knows I didn’t want you to accept all the blame.”

“You weren’t to blame. My world was caving in” I replied. “I saw no reason for you to suffer too.”

She slid her arms around my waist and leaned her head against my chest. My heart was pounding like a flamingo dancer on a kettledrum.

“I love the way your heart beats faster when I hold you in my arms,” she murmured.

I slipped my arms around her and held her tightly. Nothing in the world felt as good as Nikki’s body pressed against mine. I kissed the top of her head. I wish we could be like this forever. *Don’t be stupid*, my brain chastised me. *Boundaries. Set some boundaries. This woman will rip your heart out!*